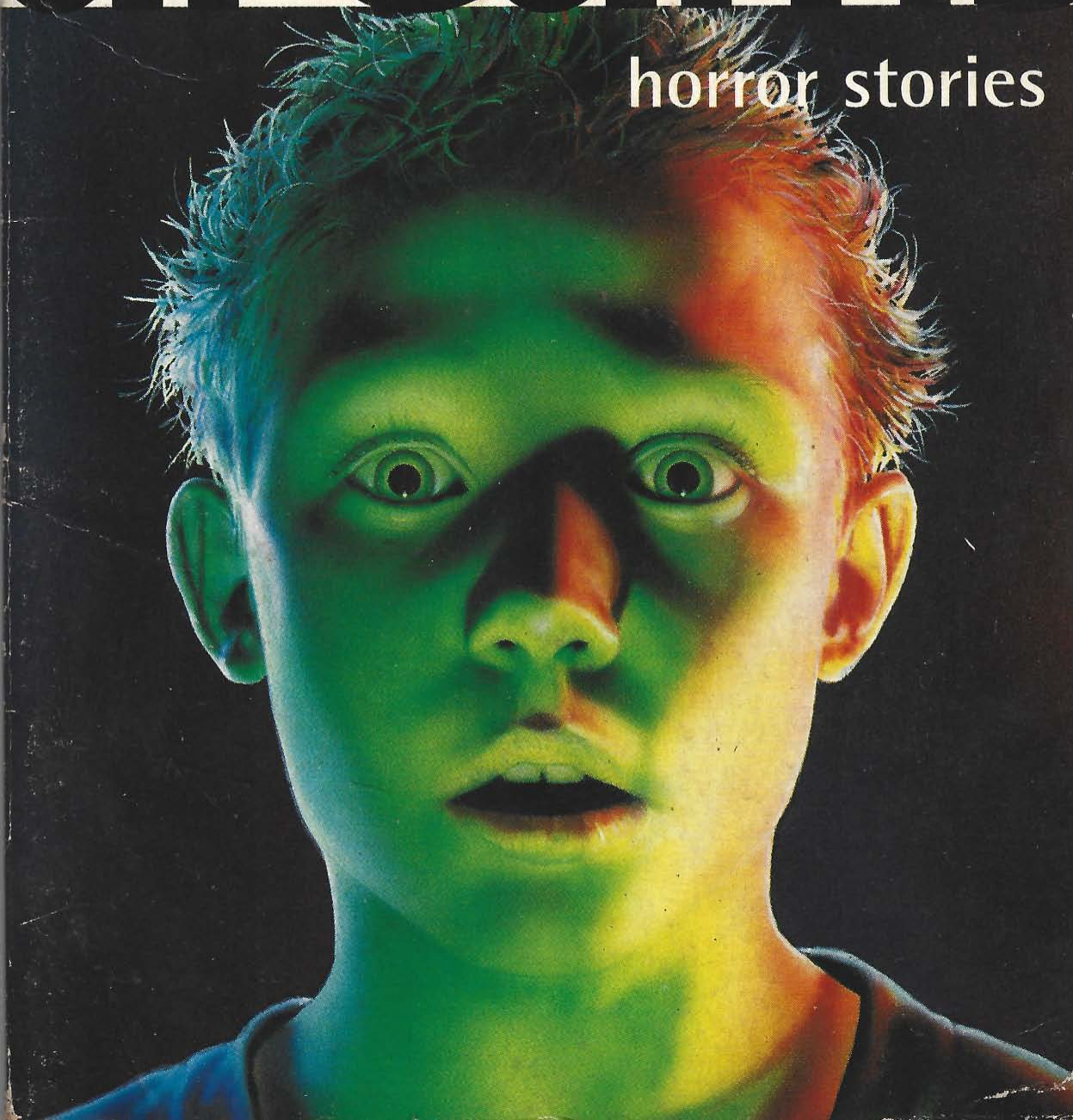
bad dreams

horror stories



bad dreams

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stories chosen by
wendy cooling

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contents

the worm under the skin **ann halam** 1

pulling the plug **colin pearce** 15

take me home **angela bull** 25

a midsummer night's scream **sebastian vince** 37

golden slumbers **jean richardson** 51

worms **john gatehouse** 63

the worm under the skin

ann halam

I think it was my idea to play Spies. Rosa says it was hers, but I think I'm right, because I'm usually the one who has ideas. We had secret code numbers and secret identities, and codebreaker notebooks. I was Total Energy 008, Ian was Destructivate 003; Jordan was Death Angel 000. Tom was Klingon 009 and Danny was The Beast With No Number. Rosa was the agency chief, and just called 'R'. We left messages for each other in our code in secret places, and gathered intelligence every playtime.

We had a stroke of luck straight away, because I saw Andrew, a boy in top juniors, doing something very mysterious on the first day after we set up the agency. As he was coming out of dinner he took something out of his pocket. I saw a glow coming from between his fingers, and then he kind of hunched against the wall, and seemed to mutter into his hand. I saw a tiny metallic aerial extend itself, and then a green ray came down through the wall, in ripples, and zinged into Andrew's head.

We decided he was probably communicating with aliens, who were controlling him. We followed him around the playground, signalling to each other and making notes of what he did and who he talked to. Everything went well, until he spotted us. This was Ian's fault. Rosa and I had trailed Andrew to the bench by the main entrance, and we were observing him – but *carefully*, because he's one of the biggest kids in our playground and he has a nasty temper. Then Ian had to go and sit right next to him.

Andrew glared at him and said 'Get lost.'

Ian said – afterwards – that he'd seen something green

coiling out from under Andrew's jacket, and he tried to take a sample of it in case it was an alien device. Rosa and I had scooted, even though he hadn't noticed us, because Andrew doesn't warn you twice. But we saw Ian pulling on something, and we yelled 'Ian! don't do that!' Andrew rolled his eyes and ground his teeth so fiercely that I could hear them from across the playground. Suddenly he grabbed Ian by the throat and started to strangle him. Strangling is Andrew's usual form of attack. He was shouting 'I told you to get lost, you stupid little oik!' Ian couldn't get lost, because he was being held down and strangled, and his head was being bashed against the bench. His face was going purple, which is a sign of the most severe stage of an Andrew strangle. I thought I'd better go and fetch Mrs Martin, the dinner lady.

Well, Mrs Martin rescued Ian, and it turned out that what Ian had been pulling was a loose thread from Andrew's jumper. Andrew said we'd been following him and staring at him and then Ian had started mutilating his clothes, and Mrs Martin told *us* off, even though it was Ian who had been strangled.

Rosa said Mrs Martin must be on the aliens' side, so next day we investigated her instead. It was our best operation yet. One of us was always right behind her where ever she went; and we took notes of all her suspicious behaviour. I didn't think a dinner lady would be controlled by aliens, because it's a very responsible job (being a dinner lady, I mean). But I was wrong. She had been taken over. I was the one who spotted the green light zinging in her eyes. But we all saw the dead human hand in her shopping bag. It was a disgusting sight: the fingernails were blue and the fingers were all pink and flobby and swollen up by alien poison. Rosa distracted her by pretending to have a cut,

while Ian and I tried to get the hand from her bag. The others kept watch, ready to run to our aid on a secret signal. All was going well when suddenly Mrs Martin leapt on me, grabbed me by the arm and yelled.

'I've had enough! You're coming to see Mrs Anderson! All three of you, you pestering little monkeys.'

There were only three of us because the others got away. Mrs Martin marched us straight to Mrs Anderson's office. She's our head teacher. She listened to Mrs Martin, who told her we'd been deliberately making her life a misery.

'They followed me to the toilet!' she said. 'They were waiting outside, and that little Rosa dived straight in after me when I came out! It's unbearable!'

'It could have been a mail-drop,' I explained, 'We had to find out if she'd left a secret message for her alien controllers.'

'And then they tried to steal my bag!'

We all stared at each other, amazed. It was a typical alien trick, to accuse us of a crime. 'She's got a dead human hand in there!' blurted Ian. Somehow, I knew this was a mistake. And I was right. He should have kept quiet. Mrs Martin looked very cross, and pulled out of her bag a squashy package of pink sausages. Now I *know* it was a hand before, but aliens can do that sort of thing. They can change the appearance of things, or make you forget that you saw anything strange, or make you remember things that never happened. They do it all the time. I was exasperated with Ian. But actually it helped, because Mrs Anderson laughed, and even Mrs Martin smiled.

Mrs Anderson said to me, 'I expect this was all *your* idea, Charlie. Your imagination's going to get you in real trouble, one of these days. Go on, back to the playground.

But if I have any more complaints, spying and alien-hunting will be banned.'

Teachers always think it's my idea, whatever happens. On my last report Mrs Dale, who was our teacher last year, wrote: *Charlie has a vivid imagination.* I asked my mother what *vivid* meant. I had a feeling Mrs Dale was talking about the way I always have a good genuine explanation, every time anything goes wrong. She used to tell me I was a genius for excuses. My mother said *'It means lively. It means you make your ideas come alive.'* It sounds all right, doesn't it? You wouldn't think that could be a problem. But it is.

Danny didn't want to play spies any more after Ian got strangled. Then Rosa and Jordan fell out about a marble that Jordan borrowed without asking, so Rosa, as the chief spy, took her 00 number away. Jordan resigned in protest. And Tom wanted to be a Klingon, not a secret agent, so he stopped playing too. But me and Rosa and Ian kept on. I honestly don't remember who first decided to investigate the hole in the wall. I don't *think* it was me: but maybe it was.

The hole was in the wall by the drinking fountain, outside the Assembly Hall entrance. It was thirty-four centimetres off the ground, and ninety centimetres from the bowl of the drinking fountain. It was seven centimetres high and roughly ten centimetres wide, or the other way round depending on how you looked at it: big enough to get a hand inside, but quite a tight fit. The strange thing about this hole was that none of us could remember how long it had been there. Ian said it must be something to do with the drinking fountain, and he thought there'd been a pipe going into the wall there at one time. But none of us could remember seeing a pipe,

and surely the building supervisor would have mended the hole if anyone knew it was there.

It was deep. You couldn't see anything inside if you looked straight in. If you looked sideways, so a glimmer of light could get past your face, you could see something whitish lying in the depths. We were sure it was a piece of folded paper, almost certainly a secret message left by another gang of spies. Or the aliens. Ian even hoped it might be money. Rosa had the smallest hand. She tried to reach it, but she couldn't. Then Ian tried, and he couldn't either. I was afraid of getting my hand stuck, and anyway we obviously needed some proper equipment.

The next day we all brought the equipment we thought would help. Ian brought his torch, Rosa brought a piece of string with a magnet tied to the end of it (in case there was something metal down there), and I brought my red-plastic tweezers from my Earth Discovery science kit that I got for my birthday. Ian's torch hardly showed up by daylight. We couldn't see more than without it: just a blur. Then we tried to dangle the string into the hole. It kept catching on the bricks; and the magnet, which was a very small one, wasn't heavy enough to weigh it down. So we tied a bent safety pin – that Rosa happened to have fastening one of her cuffs – to the end instead, and dropped it in. But it didn't bring up anything.

Then I gave Ian my tweezers, so that he could reach into the hole with them.

I didn't want to do it myself. I'd been starting to get some funny ideas about this hole. There was something strange about a hole that just appeared in a wall, for no reason. I'd begun to wonder what could have made a hole like that. Something that ate bricks? I started to think about getting your hand stuck in there ... and what if

there was something inside that was alive and had sharp teeth? I couldn't stop thinking about something being down there, that could grab and bite you. I don't know where these ideas I get come from, they just come.

'I can get my hand far enough,' reported Ian. He was excited. 'I'm reaching the bottom. Hey, this is going to work! We're going to get it out!'

'I wondered what's really in there,' muttered Rosa. 'It might not be a message. Maybe it's a five pound note. Or a bus ticket, or a sweet wrapper.'

'Maybe it's something alive,' I whispered. 'Something evil and foul. And *hungry*.'

Rosa groaned and pulled a face at me. 'Trust you, Charlie.'

She thought I was making it up. But I could *see* it in my mind. Something evil and pale and foul and slimy, coiled up in the darkness ...

Just at that moment, Ian gave a yell, and jerked himself backwards.

'What's the matter!' we cried.

He was sitting on the ground, with his mouth graping open. My red tweezers lay on the tarmac where he'd dropped them. But they weren't all there. *Something* had bitten or broken off one of the arms, leaving only half a pair of tweezers behind.

'Something grabbed them!' gasped Ian. 'It suddenly grabbed them!'

Rosa picked up the tweezers and stared at them in amazement. 'They're completely ruined,' she announced in disgust. 'Now we're never going to be able to get it out, whatever it is. Ian, I'm going to demote you for ruining the agency's equipment.'

'I didn't!' protested Ian,' And you're always demoting people, I'm sick of it –'

They were so busy yelling at each other, they'd forgotten about the hole. But I hadn't. I saw what was happening.

'Look!' I moaned. 'Look! *It's coming out*!'

Then they both saw it too. Something whitish had appeared, filling up the black space of the hole. It was slimy-looking, and it gleamed. It didn't have any eyes. It had a snaky head that moved, swaying to and fro as if it was sniffing the air. When it lifted its head up, you could see on the underside a round mouth, with rows of suckers and tiny sharp teeth. It oozed down the wall, getting longer as it moved and shrinking back on itself between surges. It was a white, blind worm, about as long as my arm. It reached the ground and squatted in a heap, right in front of Ian. He was still sitting there, getting his trousers damp on the cold tarmac. The head with the horrible sucker-mouth groped about.

Rosa made a noise like: 'NNNNNNggghhh –'

'Don't touch it!' I wailed.

It was the worst thing I could have said. Ian could never resist doing anything stupid, once he'd been told not to do it. So I knew exactly what was going to happen, the moment before it did. Ian reached out and poked the white worm with his bare fingers. It reared back, growing longer and reaching up into the air, like a cobra getting ready to strike.

'Don't pick it up!' squealed Rosa. 'Don't!'

He didn't have to. The worm shot forward, and sank its sucker teeth into Ian's hand. That's when the really terrible thing happened. It disappeared. One moment it was there, clinging to his hand like a monstrous white

leech: and Ian was staring at it, going pop-eyed with horror. Next moment it had gone. It had vanished *under his skin.*

The three of us stood gaping at each other. For a moment I thought of running away. I could go and find Tom and Danny, and play with them instead. I wanted to say: *let's stop pretending. It was my vivid imagination. It isn't true. There was no worm. Let's go and do something else.*

Ian said, in a very weird, faint voice, *'Is it real, Charlie?'*

He dragged up the arm of his jumper, and then I could see it too. The worm was moving, squirming, up Ian's arm under the skin, until it disappeared under his sleeve. I told them what I could see –

'It's got to your shoulder. It's going down your ribs –'

Ian began to cry. Rosa looked as if she was going to be sick. I expect I looked the same. 'Fetch someone! Fetch someone!' she yelled at me. 'Call an ambulance!'

Ian had hold of his belly, and all the blood had drained from his face, leaving it a horrible greeny-grey colour. I could see the front of his jumper moving hideously between his hands. When I told him that, his eyes turned up, and he flopped over onto the ground. He'd fainted.

Rosa gave another moan and suddenly bolted, running across the playground and yelling for Mrs Martin at the top of her voice.

I stayed with Ian.

So that was how the three of us ended up in Mrs Anderson's office again for the second time in three days, which was a record even for me. Ian was lying on the couch where people were allowed to lie when they were sick in school and waiting for someone to fetch them home. He was still in a faint or something. Mrs Anderson asked us to tell her exactly what had happened.

'Don't leave anything out,' she said. 'It could be very, very important.'

So we told her about the hole in the wall, and our investigation. And I explained how I'd thought of the white worm, because I just couldn't help it: and then it had appeared, and Ian had poked it, and it oozed into his hand. She asked us did anything else happen: did he swallow something, did he hit his head, did he feel ill before the worm incident, did anyone strangle him? But we said no and I think in the end she believed us. I was very glad of that because if the doctors didn't believe it was the worm I didn't see how they could save Ian – if there was any chance for him at all.

'All right,' said Mrs Anderson. 'I don't think *you* would tell me a lie, Rosa.' (Which I thought was unfair: as if I *would*. I can't help having an imagination.) She went and looked at Ian, who was still lying on the couch. She felt his tummy, and his forehead. I saw his eyelids flicker but he didn't move. Rosa and I were holding hands. I think we were both feeling as awful as possible: Rosa admitted afterwards that she really thought Ian might die.

'Maybe we'll have to send for an ambulance. But first I'm going to try some First Aid. You know, I went back to the Philippines for my last holidays.'

Mrs Anderson comes from the Philippines, originally. That's why we have a model of an ocean-going catamaran in our school's front hall, and a few other things like that. She says Philippine islanders have sailed all over the Pacific Ocean. I don't see how they did it, if they only have things like that model catamaran. It looks more like an exploded hen coop than a boat. But she's a headmistress, so I suppose it must be true.

'When I was there,' she said, 'I went to see an uncle of

mine who is a magic doctor. He cures people in all sorts of ways, sometimes by just talking to them. Sometimes a good talking-to can heal a person. In special cases, he can do a kind of surgery that doesn't need any knives or special instruments. He can reach into peoples' bodies and draw out whatever it is that's making them ill. He gave me some lessons. I'm not sure if this will work, but I'm going to have a try at helping Ian.'

She went to the washbasin that was in another corner of the office, washed her hands carefully and dried them. Then she came back to the couch, took several deep breaths and laid her hands on Ian's tummy. The worm seemed to be quiet in there now, I couldn't see it moving. 'Lie very still, Ian,' she said, in a soft voice. 'Don't be afraid. Just breathe quietly.'

She pulled up his jumper, unbuttoned his shirt and pushed up his vest, so she could put her hands on his bare skin. The worm made a bulge in the dinted down place you can feel between your two lots of ribs when you are lying on your back, as Ian was. I could see the ripples of its coils. Mrs Anderson moved her hands over it.

'Hmm.' she said. 'Yes, I think I can tackle the problem.'

Then *I saw her hands go into him.* It was as if she was dipping them into water, or into the thick foam on the top of a bowl of washing up. They went in, and disappeared almost to the wrist. There was a moment's pause, and then she pulled out the worm. She hauled it up into the air, until it was all out of him. It wriggled and writhed horribly, trying to get its sucker-mouth fixed on *her.* But she didn't give it a chance. Mrs Anderson isn't squeamish at all. I couldn't have done this myself, but she actually pulled hard on its head, and wrung its slimy neck as if it

was a chicken. I heard a snap and the worm went limp. She crumpled it up, and tossed it into the wastebin.

'There,' she said. 'That should do the trick.'

'Did it ...' Rosa quavered. 'Did it do any damage to him?'

'None at all. I got to it just in time.'

A moment later, Ian stirred and opened his eyes. 'What happened?' he said. 'Where am I?'

He had to go home anyway. I think it's the law, if a child has fainted at school. But his face had gone back to its normal colour before they took him away, and I knew he would be all right, because I'd seen what happened to the worm. And he was.

We've given up playing spies, and have gone back to playing *Aladdin*. It's not so exciting but it's safer. Mrs Anderson had a very serious talk with me, the day that the White Worm attacked Ian. I promised that I would try to stop imagining things, and if I *had to* imagine things, I would keep them to myself. I've been trying really hard. But it isn't easy.

The hole in the wall has been filled in. There's no sign of it now except a cleaner patch of mortar between the bricks by the drinking fountain, that is already starting to turn grubby as the rest of the wall. If anything still lies hidden there, it can't get out.

But the other day when I was coming into school, I noticed there's a crack in the tarmac by the gates, where I'm sure there was no crack before. I've started thinking about the things that are down there. They're long and slithery and a blackish-red colour, and they have lots of legs. They're climbing over each other, trying to get out, and snapping their poisonous jaws. There's too many to

count. If they get out, I don't know what might happen. They could swarm all over the playground. They might climb into peoples' ears, and chew out their brains. I don't want to imagine them, I'm trying not to. But I can't help it: and the crack is getting wider every day.

It just shows you, teachers ought to be more careful what they write on reports. A word that makes ideas come alive can be very dangerous.

pulling the plug

colin pearce

You know what I hate more than anything?

No, not spiders. Not slugs either. Nor the slimy bottoms of rock pools when your toes squodge down in the green, wavy weed and you can feel soft, slithery things sliding over the tops of your feet.

I hate plugholes. I hate them more than I hate my brother, William, so that shows how really, really badly I detest them. It's his fault I hate plugholes.

Not, of course, when they are just sitting there at the bottom of the sink looking up at you like a great empty eye socket. I don't mind them when the plug is sitting in the hole either, stopping it up. What I mind; what really gives me the sick, wobbly, shuddering, scream-making horrors, is when I'm sitting in the bath with hot water up to my neck, letting the bubbles soak deliciously into my skin ... and William pulls the plug out.

My skin goes cold and prickly when I see the wicked light shining in his beady black eyes and the plug on the end of its chain, swinging in his hand. I know that somewhere underneath me is a gaping great plughole and it's sucking and slurping and shlooping the water down. I know that it's going to spin faster and faster, making a whirlpool around my feet, dragging the surface down into the endless, empty shluggling plughole. And the force of it will start sucking at my toes, harder and harder as the water sinks lower and lower; and the noise of it will grow louder and uglier until I'm slipping and sliding down the

bath, desperately trying to get a grip on the sides while the plughole growls:

shwurgleshloopshaggleshrrrrroooombleglug

And I know that if I don't struggle out of the bath in the next few seconds it's going to get me, sucking and shlurping until I'm squashed and squeezed and squidged like a piece of William's yukky chewing gum and then

shlooloolooloogroppleblop!

I'll be gone for ever somewhere into the sludgy, dark depths of the bath plumbing and I'll probably never see my family again.

So that's why I hate plugholes most. And after last night I hate them even more. Funny though, ever since last night I don't hate William half as much as I did. I even feel sorry for him.

Which is amazing when you consider how revolting he is. You know what he hates most? Me.

Me! Who never does anything except try to get along with him. Ever since I can remember he has tried to make my life a misery. Mum says it's because he hasn't got over the jealousy of when I was born. Mum says William had two years of having both parents all to himself until I came along. Was he delighted to have a baby brother? No way! He used to stand over my pram plotting awful things to do. Once he gave me an earthworm to play with and I ate half of it before Mum noticed and snatched it away. They all think it's a real joke now. They shriek with laughter when they tell the visitors. It's all right for them – *they* didn't eat it! It makes me feel sick just to think about it.

That was only the beginning. Ever since then William

has been making me pay for being born. Drawing faces in my favourite books; giving me his paints and telling me to paint Mum's bedroom. When they caught me at it did William save me? Did William say, 'Sorry Mum. It was my idea. I gave them to him'?

Of course not. While I was being dragged, howling, to my room, William was peering round the corner of the stairs with his big teeth grinning a secret, satisfied smile.

And then there was the chewing gum. He sucked it and chewed it and slobbered over it for hours, then left it on Dad's chair so it stuck to his trousers. He gave me the rest of the packet. I thought he was being nice. But when Dad exploded, 'Who has been eating this filthy stuff and left it on my chair!' guess who got the blame?

Right! Me.

But worse than that was William's awful stories. We shared the same bedroom, and when Dad and Mum had said goodnight and closed the door William would slip out of bed and tiptoe across to me. He knelt there and whispered his stories; about ghosts and goblins hiding under our beds and waiting in corners to leap on us.

I don't know why I listened. I would slide further and further under the covers, fascinated by every word, unable to stop myself hearing. When he had finished he would patter back to bed with a wicked little giggle and be fast asleep in five seconds. But me – I'd lie awake, wide-eyed and terrified, waiting for the goblins to get me. And when I could stand it no longer I'd yell, 'Muuuuu-um!' until she came.

'What's the problem?' Mum would say, sitting on my bed and stroking my hair.

'William's been telling me awful stories.'

'Not again.'

'I'm frightened. Can I come in with you?'

''Fraid not. You're getting so big there isn't room.'

'But he'll do it again.'

'How can he when he's asleep, silly? Anyway, don't listen. You know they're only pretend stories. Ignore them. I'll leave the door open so the light gets in. Okay?'

Then she would kiss me and go, leaving the door open just a crack.

But the worst story William ever told me was about the plughole. Don't ask me why it was more frightening than ghosts and goblins. Maybe it was because I'd never seen a ghost or a goblin; but every time I had a bath, every time I washed my hands, I stared down into the plughole and remembered William's story.

He said there were things living down the plughole. Little greedy crawling things and slithery worms. They'd eat anything: soggy crumbs and fat from the washing up, bits of soap, slimy ropes of hair that clung to the metal grate over the hole. And when they were hungry they slithered and scuttled up the pipes until they found their way blocked by the bath plug. And they would wait there, growing hungrier and hungrier, until someone pulled the plug out ...

'Muuu-uum! William's telling the plughole story again.' William was at the other end of the bath. The good end. I was the one who got the taps and the plughole, because I was the youngest. This was last night. We have baths together sometimes to save on the hot water. William had sunk until the bubbles came up to his chin. In his best whispery scary voice he was telling about the plughole.

'Muuuu-uum!'

I could hear her footsteps coming crossly up the stairs. The bathroom door burst open. 'Really Tommy, I must have been up and down these stairs a hundred times. What now!'

'William's telling the plughole story –'

William had sunk his smug face under the water where he couldn't hear. His hair was waving about like black seaweed. I could have leaned down and bitten his toe. I would have, too, if Mum hadn't been there. She said, 'When will you learn, you silly boy, that it's only make believe? The plughole carries the water down to the drains. That's all. There's nothing living down there. Ignore him. He only does it because he knows it frightens you. He'll get fed up if it stops working.'

'But it *does* work; and I can't help it.'

William burst through the surface, gasping in the air, still managing to keep the silly grin on his face, pretending he didn't know what was going on.

'William, stop teasing your brother,' said Mum. 'If I have to come upstairs one more time you'll both be in trouble.'

'He's making it up,' said William. 'I've been under water.'

Mum shook her head and went out, swinging the door partly closed as she went. We heard her going downstairs. William looked at me. I scowled back at him. There was something going on in his mind. I could tell. He stretched out his body until his feet came right past me.

'Get up your own end!' I muttered.

He took no notice. He looked at me with a secret tricky grin and said. 'They'd get you first. You're nearest the plug.'

A shudder went right through me as I thought about it. 'I'm getting out before then,' I said scornfully. 'I won't let Mum pull the plug till I'm out. Then they'll get you.'

He started to sit up, and he was laughing. At first I didn't understand what was so funny. He was helpless with giggling. He spluttered and choked and the tears began to run down his face. And then I realised why.

I felt the little swirl of water and round my body. I felt the tug of it just behind me and a sudden ***shlurgleglurp***. My whole body went rigid. My skin prickled with cold terror and my eyes popped. Hanging from William's toes, swinging at the end of its chain, was the plug!

I shrieked. I screamed. I clung to the side of the bath and clawed my way towards William's end. All the time the whirlpool over the plughole was growing. It started as a little dent; then the water began to gather and swirl, building up in a wave and sucking down in a thick, twisting thread to the plughole. The whirlpool grew steeper and deeper, reaching out for me. William had his feet in my sides and was pushing me back. I screamed for Mum, but all I heard in reply was the ***shloopleshwig-gleshlumschweeeech*** of the water as it gathered speed, sucking harder and harder, emptying the bath and dragging me down. I struggled to my knees. William was weak with laughter. I clawed my way to my feet, yelling for Mum, but all I could hear was the awful growling, slobbering suck of the plughole and William's helpless, hysterical giggling.

He grabbed one of my ankles to pull me back. With a terrified cry I flung myself over the side of the bath and fell onto the mat. I could still hear the great gobbling growl of the plughole as I fled out of the door with a shriek – straight into the arms of Mum.

I jumped up and clung hard round her neck. She was furious. I was dripping wet and now she was, too; and there was bathwater all over the carpet.

'What on earth is going on!' she yelled.

'W-W-W-W-William's taken the plug out of the hole,' I cried. 'It was trying to get me!'

'How many times do I have to tell you, Tommy; it's only a story. There is no way you can get sucked down the plughole. And there is nothing down there to come out and get you.'

I gripped her harder. She unhooked my arms and stood me, dripping, on the carpet. 'Look. Come with me. I'll show you,' she said.

We went back into the bathroom. Everything was quiet. The awful shlobbering shlerp of the plughole had stopped. The bath was empty. There were just a few bubbles clinging to the edges, making soft, collapsing noises, and a flannel lying on the bottom. William was nowhere to be seen. It isn't a big bathroom. There's nowhere to hide. He had just ... vanished.

Clinging to Mum I leaned over the bath and peered nervously down the plughole. Nothing but a few strands of black hair caught on the metal grating at the top, I called, quietly, 'William ...'

No answer.

Mum snorted furiously down her nose. 'Really Tommy! He isn't even in here!'

'But Mum –' She wasn't listening. She strode off to the bedroom to find him.

She didn't though. She still hasn't. Nor has Dad. They've tried everywhere. Even the medicine cabinet, and *that's* not big enough to hide the cat. That was yesterday. The

plumbers arrived today and took out all the pipes under the bath. This afternoon they're going to start on the ones downstairs. After that they'll lift the drains out in the road. I suppose they *will* find him; eventually. When they do I'm going to make a special effort to be nicer to him. And I expect he'll try to be nicer to me, too.

take me home

angela bull

Shuffle, shuffle; drag, drag. Class 5H trailed round the stately home of Eskridge Court; up and down the carved oak staircases, and through the crimson splendour of rooms and passages. Clipboards and biros sagged from limp hands. Dog-eared questionnaires flapped.

'Why did Lord Eskridge build a porch on the south front?'

'So he could spit on his visitors from the top of it,' wrote Sam, the class joker. He flashed his clipboard round, collecting sniggers.

Luke didn't laugh. The rest of the class might be fed up, and in need of a giggle. He felt shrivelled with dread. He didn't know where the fear that was attacking him came from. He only felt a sickening certainty that, hidden in the depths of the vast house, something sinister lurked, waiting for him. He huddled inside his anorak.

'Have there been any murders here?' asked Naomi, trying to brighten things up.

The guide, who was showing them round, turned towards her, pebble spectacles gleaming on his gaunt face. His voice was tired and bored. Probably showing people round the same place over and over again *was* boring.

'No,' he said. 'A suicide once, but no murders.'

Was that right, wondered Luke. Evil – murderous evil – seemed to seep out of the richly-papered walls, choking him. He fumbled at his neck, and found he'd unzipped his anorak already.

'This is the picture gallery,' droned the guide, leading them on.

It was another huge room. Haughty faces stared down from the portrait on the walls.

'What a load of poofs!' risked Sam.

'Sam! That's enough,' their teacher, Mrs Hunt, warned him sharply.

The guide didn't seem to have heard. He stopped under one of the paintings.

'Here,' he told them, 'you see Lady Eskridge, with her pageboy bringing her a cup of hot chocolate.'

Her ladyship was posed on a garden seat, in a swirl of flounced and silken skirts. The pageboy, in a blue satin suit and powdered wig, was holding the cup on a silver tray.

Luke was so surprised that, for a moment, he forgot his fear. Between the white wig and the blue satin, the pageboy's face was black. Like mine, he thought. And then the terror closed it on him again.

'*Number 16: what is the date of the portrait of Lady Eskridge with her page?*' Mrs Hunt read out from the questionnaire. 'Look carefully. Yes, Naomi, 1790. Thank you *very* much for saving everyone else the trouble of finding the label for themselves. Well, now you've got the answer, children, write it down.'

Biros scraped over paper. Luke's numbers ran up the sheet like demented spiders, because his hand was shaking so much. He had a horrid feeling that the evil he'd sensed was beaming out from this picture.

He gave it a rapid second glance. Lady Eskridge smiled serenely; the black pageboy handed her the cup of chocolate –

And then his heart jumped in his chest. Sprawling under a tree in a corner, as if it didn't properly belong to the picture but had got there by accident, was a doll; the

weirdest doll Luke had ever seen. Its round head was made of shining, conker-brown wood, and a thick mop of black hair burst from it, like the rays of a sun in a small child's drawing. It was wrapped in a brightly patterned robe, and its eyes –

Luke jumped backwards, crashing into Daniel. Biros flew.

'Idiot!' snapped Daniel.

'What on earth's the matter, Luke?' Mrs Hunt demanded.

'Nothing,' gasped Luke. His heart was thudding so hard, it was a wonder he could speak at all.

'Perhaps you've seen the doll,' said the guide, in his flat, toneless voice. 'Odd little creature, isn't it?'

'It's certainly not an ordinary doll,' Mrs Hunt agreed.

'It came from Africa – with the pageboy,' the guide explained.

'How interesting,' said Mrs Hunt, in a bright, teacher's way. 'Did you hear that, everyone?'

If the class had heard, most of them weren't specially interested. They milled around in scuffling groups. The guide went on talking.

'Black pageboys were the fashion in 1790, and Lady Eskridge liked to be fashionable. So the boy arrived here, with the doll. Poor boy! He soon wished he hadn't brought it.'

'Why?' asked Mrs Hunt.

'There's a legend at Eskridge Court,' said the guide, 'that the doll was a bully. It wanted something from the boy, and it wouldn't leave him alone till it got it. Who knows what the thing was?' He shrugged. 'The boy never explained. But other people saw how the doll tormented him. It was always at his side, harassing and pestering

him. Probably neither he nor Lady Eskridge meant it to get into the picture, but, you see, it's crept in.'

Mrs Hunt laughed merrily.

'Come off it,' she protested. 'You're talking as if it were alive. It's only a doll.'

'*Only* a doll,' repeated the guide. 'But dolls are powerful things, you know. Dolls, or poppets, or images, or whatever you like to call them. And you can't get away from the fact that the boy began behaving oddly, as if the little creature was – well, driving him mad. People heard him raging at it. They saw him hitting it, and hurling it against brick walls. And then one day they found him floating in the lily pond, with the doll on the path nearby.'

'Drowned, you mean?' Mrs Hunt sounded startled.

'Yes. He'd killed himself to escape. That was the suicide I spoke of. Lady Eskridge had the doll locked up in an oak chest, and there it's stayed for more than two hundred years.'

'So it's not around any longer.' Luke, alone of all the class, had been listening intently, and the words burst from him before he could stop them.

'Well, as a matter of fact –' The guide studied Luke, his spectacles glinting. 'I decided to try a little experiment, so I got it out of the chest yesterday, and put it in that showcase over there. Why don't you have a look at it?'

'Me?' Luke was horrified.

'Yes, you. Go on. Don't be scared.'

There seemed no way out. Luke's shaking knees carried him unwillingly across the polished floor. The showcase loomed sinister as a snake's cage. He took a deep breath, and shot a quick glance through the lid. Briefly, his nerves uncoiled.

'Two hundred years in an old chest hasn't done it much good. It's very faded,' mused the guide, standing beside him.

He was right. The warm brown face of the doll in the picture had dulled to the sullen beige of a stale biscuit. The black hair was matted with dust. The robe looked colourless, and cobweb thin. Worn out, finished, the doll slumped on a mat. Luke allowed himself to look more closely. After all, as Mrs Hunt said, it was only a –

Terror seized him as eyes, like grits of glass, sparked up from the doll's face. They stared menacingly at him.

'I want to go home,' announced the doll, silently but savagely. '*Take me home.*'

It was impossible! It was real! Mad with panic, Luke dashed for the door.

'Luke!' Mrs Hunt shouted. 'Whatever's wrong?'

'Want the toilet, miss.'

He wasn't actually sick. He splashed water on his face, and clutched the edge of the basin until his heart began beating more evenly. He scrubbed his back and armpits with his shirt, to dry off the sweat, and wiped his palms on his jeans.

That terrible doll! It had felt so evil.

Then half a dozen others came crashing into the cloakroom, and he let their safe school chatter pour over him, calming his throbbing nerves.

It was a fine day, so they ate their packed lunches outside.

'Meet up at the stables in half an hour,' Mrs Hunt told them, when they'd finished. 'We'll look at the carriages, and then the old laundry.'

Luke thrust his sandwich wrappers and empty Coke can into a litter bin. His bag felt pleasantly light without

them. Only, while he was doing it, everyone else moved away. He could see them, though, in the distance; some girls giggling in a tight group, some boys kicking a ball across the grass. He didn't mind being left alone. He wandered, unseeingly, down a little path between rose-beds, still churned up inside.

What a horrible experience! He couldn't remember anything like it happening before. He glanced back towards the range of windows along the south front. Even if they belonged to the picture gallery, they were all – thankfully – closed, shutting the doll in a double prison of house and showcase. It couldn't get at him again.

The path led to a pond. Monstrous goldfish skulked in its muddy waters, under wads of dank lily leaves. Luke felt his hair prickle against his scalp. This must be the pond where the pageboy met his watery death.

He swerved away, so quickly that his bag crashed against his ribs. It felt as heavy as if half his lunch was still there. He peeped inside – and dropped the bag in horror.

There, among crumbs and shreds of paper, lay the doll. Its shock of hair spread out, thick with dust. Its eyes glinted up into his.

'*Take me home!*' it insisted, with silent determination.

Luke grabbed it between finger and thumb, and flung it as hard as he could into the distance. There was a faint crash as it fell among some bushes. Luke seized his empty bag, and sped, full tilt, for the stables.

By the time the others joined him, he was outwardly calm again. But the mystery was making his head spin. How could the doll have got into his bag? Had someone, noticing the shock he'd had when he bent over the case in the picture gallery, taken the doll out, and sneaked it into

his bag for a joke, when he wasn't looking? Sam, most likely. That *must* be the explanation, mustn't it?

'Can I leave my bag in the coach, miss?' he asked, when Mrs Hunt arrived.

'Yes. Leave anything; bags, coats. It's quite warm,' said Mrs Hunt.

Luke shed his possessions, and the coach boot was locked.

He didn't, afterwards, remember anything about the tour of the stables, laundry, and other outbuildings. From time to time he scribbled odd, shaky words on his questionnaire, because that was what the others were doing, but he hardly knew what they meant. All his energies were concentrated on looking for a small brown head of matted hair, a faded robe like a shroud, and glittering, glass-chip eyes. But he didn't see them; and, after all, how could he, when he himself had chucked the doll away into some bushes?

At last it was time to go back to the coach. Luke scrambled in, his head aching. The others sang, and shouted, and munched crisps. He thought about those eyes, with their frightening, hypnotic power, and about the strange message. 'Take me home.' But surely Eskridge Court *was* the doll's home. It had been there for over two hundred years.

Back at school, everyone tumbled out of the coach. The driver unlocked the boot, and reached for their gear, Luke's last of all.

'Got a thermos in here?' he asked Luke.

'*A thermos?*'

'That's right. In your pocket.'

The driver turned away, and Luke fingered his anorak.

Something bulged, cylinder-shaped. It wasn't – it couldn't be –

He pulled it out. The doll! Fierce eyes glared from the dingy brown of its face.

'Take me home!'

'You horrible creature!' hissed Luke, in despair. 'I don't know how you wormed yourself into my pocket, but I'll get rid of you somehow.'

He thrust it cruelly back into his pocket, and headed for home. Some workmen were digging up drains in the road. Luke, passing, saw they'd taken the cover off a manhole, before moving further along. He stopped, and looked down into the drain. Murky water far below reflected the daylight. It would do.

Luke snatched the doll from his pocket, making sure its eyes were turned away from him.

'Right!' he told it, through clenched teeth. 'You've had it now.'

There was a plop as the filthy water closed over the doll's head. Luke ran.

'Had a good trip?' called Mum from the kitchen.

'OK.' He couldn't begin to explain what had happened. He put on the telly, and tried to forget.

It was weird how many times the word home came up, no matter how often he switched channels. Home. But where *was* the doll's home? It wasn't with him; he was certain of that.

He'd never felt so ready for bed. He flopped in, stretching his legs thankfully down under the quilt.

'No!'

He leaped out, and halfway across the room.

He knew, with sickening horror, exactly what slimy thing his toes had touched.

For a long moment he paused, while his heart raced in overdrive. Then he threw back the quilt. The doll lay there, with dirty water oozing from its robe and matted hair, and a dead leaf stuck to its cheek. Over the leaf, its eyes crackled with fury.

'Take me home!'

Luke bundled it into the quilt, rolling it round and round, to muffle it, smother it – kill it. Then he fell on to the bed, and crashed out from sheer fright.

His sleep was a jumble of dreams. Often he didn't dream, or else he forgot the dreams he'd had. But now, all through the night, he seemed to be wandering in some brilliant landscape, which he'd never seen in real life. A shimmering green sea thundered up over a white beach, flinging dazzling spray from its breakers. Palm trees dropped inviting shade over the hot sand. Bright birds darted through the air, in a twitter of song. Perfumed flowers swayed as he passed.

And always, by the green breakers, or under the flowering bushes, he kept glimpsing a round, conker-brown head, and an exotic, colourful robe.

He woke, stiff with cold, in the morning, knowing what the dreams had meant. Reluctantly, he unrolled the quilt. From its muddy face, the doll's eyes glittered ferociously.

'Take me home!'

'I know what you want,' said Luke. 'You've been telling me all night. You want me to take you to Africa. Well, too bad. I shan't. I'm not an African boy. I'm British. You're going to Eskridge Court. *That's* your home.'

He slammed it into his bag, and piled a wodge of old comics on top of it.

He set off as if for school, dodged round to the bus station, and caught a bus out to the stately old house. He

walked up the drive, trying to keep calm. The doll lay quiet and motionless in his bag.

The guide with the pebble glasses was standing in the hall.

'Well, well,' he said, when he saw Luke. 'You've come back, have you? Don't worry about buying a ticket. We'll let you in.'

It was as if he knew everything already. Luke stepped into the splendid hall.

'I've brought the doll back,' he explained in a rush. 'The one in the picture, and the showcase.'

'I noticed it had gone,' said the guide.

'I didn't steal it,' said Luke. 'It came with me all by itself. I didn't want it. It's evil; wicked. I'm getting out of here.'

He hurled his bag, with the doll in it, to the farthest corner of the hall, and bolted out of the door, leaving the dumbfounded guide staring after him.

In the drive he paused, gasping for breath.

The doll lay on the gravel in front of him; determined, ruthless.

'Take me home!'

'I don't come from Africa!' screamed Luke.

He kicked the doll violently into a flowerbed.

Next moment it was back again, nudging his shoe, hypnotizing him with its gritty glass eyes.

'Take me home!'

Panic swirled over Luke. How could he escape? Would he be the doll's victim for the rest of his life, until, in despair, he killed himself?

'Leave me alone,' he cried, and he began running down a little path. The lily pond gleamed ahead of him.

'Hi! Excuse me.'

A hand stretched towards him. Luke jumped sideways, and saw – a black face. A man was coming up the path.

'Sorry to stop you,' said the man, 'but I'm lost. Is this the way to the house?'

Luke couldn't speak. The doll was there, watching from a rosebed, its hair matted with earth, its eyes glittering.

All at once, the man saw it too. He stared; bent down.

'What's this? It looks like it's come from Nigeria, long ago. What's a Nigerian doll doing in an English garden?'

Before Luke could answer, the doll gave a spring. One moment it was on the ground, the next it was in the man's hands. Wriggling into the hollow of his palms, it gazed ferociously upwards.

'Take me –'

Luke didn't wait to hear any more. He shot away down the drive, with the speed of a breaker crashing on a distant shore. A *very* distant shore.

a midsummer night's scream

sebastian vince

The cold blackness of outer space was torn apart by a brilliant white light. A massive object some three kilometres across raced through the darkness, trailing a plume of smoke and fire thousands of kilometres long. As it passed the northernmost tip of Earth, a small block of rock, no bigger than a drink can, chipped off and plummeted towards the Earth's atmosphere. If we look at history, from Biblical times to the Norman Conquest, comets have always spelled trouble. The passing of this comet proved to be no exception.

1

Dusk was settling on the Turrells' garden. Shadows cast over the flowerbeds made the carnations look like giant sunflowers. A slight chill cut through the evening sunshine like a wandering ghost.

At the far end of the lawn, over some old paving stones, Ralph and his cousin Rachel were putting up a tent.

'The pegs have to be banged in facing *away* from the tent. That way they won't be pulled out during a hurricane,' said Ralph, with the authority of a seasoned explorer.

'It's my tent, and I think it looks nicer if the pegs go in straight,' said Rachel. 'And anyway, if there's a hurricane, I'm going right back to the house where I won't get squashed by a tree.'

'Sissy!' hissed Ralph.

Ralph's aunt and uncle were staying with his parents

while their new house was being decorated. Yesterday was Rachel's birthday and Ralph couldn't believe it when their grandparents gave her a tent. A tent! With real snow-lining and a frost-proof groundsheet. How could Grandma and Grandpa have been so totally deaf to his own not-so-subtle hints for camping stuff *months* before his birthday? What were they thinking when they gave him a book on Gilbert Straw, the famous underwater ventriloquist? Ralph had even checked the labels on both the parcels to see if there was some mistake but, no! fate had dealt him a sickening blow.

By some freak coincidence, Ralph and Rachel had their birthdays a day apart and as a result their parents thought they were destined to be lifelong mates. They were always pushing the two into doing stuff together, and saying things like, 'Oh it's so sweet! Those two are inseparable. They're like two peas in a pod.' And when Rachel decided she wanted to spend the entire weekend camped in the garden, it was the last straw. Cooped up in what should have been *his* tent – with a *girl*! What would his mates say? Ralph had already had a close shave when his mate Matt came over to go fishing. Luckily, Ralph was in his bedroom getting his duvet for the tent. He spotted Matt from the window and managed to call out before he reached the front door.

'I've got leprosy! Don't come any closer!' yelled Ralph.

'What?' said Matt, shocked.

'Well, the doctor says it's chickenpox but I'm sure it's leprosy, or at least the plague. If you have any contact with me, your head will fall off. I'll be fine on Monday. Bye!' He had slammed the window shut to avoid any more tricky questions and clomped down the stairs in an embarrassed huff.

'Right,' said Ralph. 'Next, we build a fire. It'll provide warmth, enable us to cook the food we catch, and will deter wolves.'

'It's stupid to mess around with fire and it'll leave an ugly burnt patch on the lawn. Anyway, we've got a huge plate of sandwiches from your mother,' said Rachel annoyingly.

'Just shut up and get in the tent!' snapped Ralph. 'I've got maths homework to do and since I'm sharing a tent with the Holland Park School Maths Scholar prizewinner, I might as well make the most of it.'

'Why do you always have to be so sarcastic?' Rachel asked. 'I know this sounds ridiculous but sometimes I get a sneaking suspicion that you don't like me.' She had a particularly whiny voice that grated on Ralph's eardrums like long nails scraping a blackboard.

The campsite was pitched at the end of the lawn behind a guard of proud poplar trees. You couldn't see the site from the house, which was a pity because what happened later that night could possibly have been averted by a little parental intervention. Then again, possibly not.

The sun dropped quickly below the horizon and darkness fell on Ralph's garden as if a light bulb had blown. Inside the tent, the radio was on.

'Well, we're drawing to the end of the summer solstice, listeners. I hope you enjoy the next few songs, specially selected to take you through the last hour of the longest day of the year. The Witching Hour . . .'

A few hundred metres beyond Ralph's garden was wasteground. The site of an old church, demolished years ago, the area had been left derelict while the council debated what to do with it. Many years ago, there were rumours of a lost grave to the west of the site. When the

church authorities transferred the graveyard to the new church, all but one of the tombstones were accounted for. The lost grave had never been found and the rumours died along with the old folk who remembered them.

The wasteground was now graveyard only to ancient fridges and rusting shopping trolleys. Sticking out of the ground, they were sorry substitutes for the grave's stolen dignity. Old plastic fertiliser bags and numerous decomposing binliners full of putrid refuse littered the ground. Strewn about carelessly were balding tyres and bits of car, barely covered with nettles and fern. Anything that was unwanted was discarded and left there to rot by people in the surrounding neighbourhood, too lazy to go to the proper rubbish dump up the road.

Suddenly, an orange flash illuminated the area, lighting up the rubbish like a criminal caught in the act. The flash was quickly followed by a thunder clap. Then a loud thud. Then nothing, except the pitter-patter of mud and shingle as it fell back to Earth.

'What was that?' said Rachel, her attention momentarily diverted from making Ralph look like an idiot with his maths project.

'That's a multiplication symbol. You told me to put it down after the three.'

'No, that noise, like thunder. If it's going to rain, I'm going inside.'

'Look, this is a Four Seasons tent. £129.99 at Millets. It can withstand the monsoons of Papua New Guinea as well as the blizzards of the Himalayas,' said Ralph. He could recite the tent brochure word for word since he spent many an afternoon browsing longingly around the camping section. He stuck his head out of the tent.

'It's not going to rain, the sky's full of stars and there's

not a cloud in sight. Listen, I think we should try and get a few of these sums wrong or else my teacher's going to know I've had help.'

The wasteground glowed with an eerie blue light. There was a crackling sound like a crisp packet being scrunched. Over by a tree, where the light was most intense, there was a small crater. At the centre, a large round egg was hatching. Transparent goo glistened in the moonlight, and from within the remains of the egg emerged something from another world.

A dark, shiny eel-like creature forced its way out and flopped onto the dewy grass. It wriggled violently and seemed to grow. An incredible metamorphosis was taking place. Terrible claws grew from the sides of the thing, and its head began to sprout eyes and transparent teeth, long and sharp as broken glass. Its black body stretched and grew fatter, like a disgusting giant slug. Grass and twigs stuck to its moist body as its deadly claws struggled to get a firm foothold. Now about half a metre long, it stopped wriggling. It arched its back to the black sky and screamed at the moon. 'KREEEEE!' Then it scuttled off into the night, darkness receiving its new friend like a long-lost brother.

At the far end of the wasteground, just to the west of where the old church once stood, something else stirred.

2

From the edge of the garden, the tent glowed from the light inside. The two figures of Ralph and Rachel moving around looked like a Chinese lantern play. Just behind the wall in the next-door garden a cat screeched, then fell

abruptly silent. The earth below the wall in the Turrells' garden began to move. There was a brief pause before soil shot up in all directions. The dark creature emerged, shiny with cat's blood. The creature saw the silhouettes of the two cousins. Its jaws opened slightly; saliva and gore dripped from its teeth. It crouched amongst the undergrowth and watched.

Inside the tent, Ralph and Rachel were frantically putting on their shoes.

'I don't know what that was but if I'm not back in the house in five seconds I think I'm going to faint,' whispered Rachel, shaking. Even Ralph was ready to get out of there, away from whatever was rustling around outside.

Wearing pyjamas and sneakers, they sprinted across the lawn to the side door. All the lights were off.

'Oh no!' said Ralph. 'They've all gone out to dinner. Come on, we'll go round the front. Mrs Petri's supposed to be babysitting, we'll bang on the sitting room window.'

They peered through the glass. The TV was on and Mrs Petri was slumped on the sofa, spark out. They banged on the window furiously. 'Help! Help!' Mrs Petri didn't stir.

'Great,' said Rachel. 'What a babysitter.'

'It's the first time we've used her, Mum wasn't to know. Anyway, what we've got to do now is find a place to hide. Whatever that thing was, I don't want it to find us. Come on.'

They raced around to the garage on the other side of the house. The doors were chained shut but Ralph managed to create a gap just wide enough for them to squeeze through.

'We'll be safe in here,' said Ralph, his white face revealing his lack of conviction.

Outside, the moonlight stretched shadows across the

lawn. The trees and bushes loomed long over the grass like giant tentacles. Among them, a dark shape moved. It stopped at the tent and went in. There was a ripping sound. The radio switched on.

'We've reached the end of our show this evening. We hope you enjoy the rest of tonight, when only the dead will sleep soundly –'

There was a crunch and the radio cut off. The thing had destroyed it. The tent collapsed as the black creature shot out in search of the two humans.

At the entrance of the garage, the alien stopped. It could smell the sweet scent of its prey. It knew they were in there. It began to dig.

Back in the wasteground, just to west of the old church site, a second hole had formed in the ground. Walking away from it was the ragged figure of a young boy. About five feet tall, he was wearing torn clothes that came from the last century. His face was darkened with soil and his skin was as white as the moon. Running about excitedly at his feet was a little terrier, white, with black patches. It wore a leather collar adorned with little brass rats. At his side, the boy swung an old paraffin storm lantern, burning with a dull red flame. He sang as he walked. 'A-hunting, a-hunting, a-hunting I will go . . .'

In the garage, the two cousins huddled together as the sound of the earth being dug beneath them echoed round the room.

SCRATCH. SCRATCH. SCRATCH.

In the corner of the garage, the concrete floor began to break up. It crumbled into powder between the gnashing teeth that now appeared through the hole. Bright green eyes stared up at Ralph and Rachel with a look of rage and determination that sent a shiver down their spines.

Nothing could stop it now! The beast emerged from the ground, shaking off the soil around its body like a wet dog. Its long tail slowly swept the floor behind it as it sized up its victims. The thing was in no hurry. It seemed to know the two humans had nowhere left to run.

Rachel's gaze lifted from the beast to the windsurfing-board hanging from the ceiling of the garage. She grabbed Ralph's arm and pointed upwards with her eyes. The slimy alien lunged at them, its teeth snapping and a disgusting slurping noise gurgling up from its throat. Rachel sprang upwards towards the surfboard and by some miracle, managed to grip it firmly. She swung her legs up as the alien snapped at her heels, just missing her foot. Ralph had moved with Rachel but he was a split second too late. The alien headed him off, snarling, as if to say, 'Just try it mate.'

The alien advanced. Ralph crept back. Sweat streamed down his face. The beast opened its terrible jaws and crouched low, preparing to strike. All Ralph could do was wait for death. He closed his eyes. The beast sprang. It gripped Ralph's sleeve and shook him with the viciousness of a pit-bull terrier. It loosened its grip and backed off, regaining its strength for a final assault on Ralph's throat. The slimy alien rushed forward.

'This is it,' thought Ralph.

Suddenly, a pair of hands swooped down from above, grabbed Ralph's shoulders with the strength of ten men, and lifted him to safety. It was Rachel. Gripping the surfboard with her legs, she had hung upside down and saved Ralph from the monstrous jaws.

'W-Wha . . . how?' stuttered Ralph.

'Under-twelves gymnastics regatta. I won,' said Rachel,

with an embarrassed shrug. Ralph was seriously impressed.

'Look, I'm sorry I was ever mean to you,' said Ralph.

'It wasn't your fault, I know our parents can be a bit pushy sometimes and I know you would prefer to hang around with your mates. I can be pretty annoying, but that's just because I wanted to be with my friends too.'

'Well,' said Ralph, 'you'll always be my cousin but from now on you're an Official Mate of Ralph Turrell.'

'I'm honoured,' said Rachel, giggling.

Down below, the alien was out of its mind with rage. Turning round and round in circles, it constantly raised its terrible head to snap at the two cousins.

In the garden, amongst the same shadows the alien had found so comforting, another dark figure stalked. It was the boy. He stopped at the campsite and examined the wreckage of the tent. The paving stones beneath it were exposed. The boy knelt down and ran his fingers along some grooves in one of the marble slabs. It was an inscription! '*Here lies . . . Tatt . . . atcatcher . . .*' It wasn't a paving stone at all. It was a gravestone. Most of the words had been worn down by years of people walking over it. The boy stood up. Tears welled up in his eyes and made little white tracks down his cheeks as they cleared a path through the grime on his face. 'A-hunting, a-hunting . . .' sang the boy as he disappeared into the night.

CRACK! went the windsurfing-board as the strain of supporting two people began to show.

'Ooh!' cried Rachel. 'What now?'

'I'd like to say otherwise, but I'm afraid I don't know,' said Ralph, choking with fear.

'Move away from the centre of the board!' yelled

Rachel. 'It can't support our combined weight but we might have a chance if we stay at either end.'

CRACK! The board decided it had had enough. It split down the middle and the two friends tumbled to the ground. The thing was waiting for them. It leaped.

A flash of white streaked in through the garage door and grabbed the beast by the neck. It was the terrier. He pinned the alien's head to the floor, his teeth digging into its slimy flesh. The alien screamed, its long tail wrapped around the dog's body like a snake, trying to crush the little animal. For what seemed like an age, the two creatures lay stuck in a death lock, each trying to crush the other. After a while, the struggling slowed down, the two entwined bodies looked like one new creature. The fighting stopped. They just lay there, still as statues.

'Are they dead?' asked Rachel, edging towards the door.

'I think so,' replied Ralph, following closely behind.

'Oh, that poor, brave little dog,' cried Rachel, sobbing.

Outside, they regained their breath. Little clouds of condensation billowed around their heads.

'We've got to wake up Mrs Petri,' said Ralph. 'I'm going to chuck a brick through the living room window. I don't care if I do get into trouble, as long as we get help.'

They made their way round to the side of the house. The alleyway was dank and dark. Water dripped from pipes sticking out of the wall and moss growing on the pavement made the going slippery. It was very, very dark. Mrs Petri was still snoring away and Ralph was looking on the ground for something to break the window.

'I'm really scared,' said Rachel.

'Look, that thing, whatever it was, is lying dead in the garage. We'll be fine as soon as Mrs Petri wakes up and lets us in,' said Ralph.

Over in the corner, just by the dustbins, barely two feet away from Rachel, a pair of green eyes stared out from the darkness.

Rachel screamed. Ralph looked back to see his cousin being dragged away, her cries becoming muffled as she turned the corner leading into the garden.

'I'm coming!' yelled Ralph, feeling both scared and brave at the same time.

The alien dragged Rachel to the end of the lawn, behind a hedgerow. Its ugly head loomed over her face as it wrapped its tail around her body. The pain in her chest was unbearable. She couldn't breathe. The alien hissed and spat green foam at Rachel's face.

Ralph reached the foot of the garden but a mist hung low over the lawn, covering Rachel like a shroud.

'Rachel!' he called. 'Rachel.'

Ralph ran around the huge garden, searching frantically, but he knew in his heart that it was no use. Panting with fear and panic, he slumped to the ground in despair.

Rachel was paralysed with fear. Her whole body became stiff as she tried to resist being crushed. She knew she was going to die. Suddenly, there was a glint of steel in the moonlight as a huge baling fork flashed towards the alien.

'C'm 'ere my beauty, let's 'ave ya, ya 'orrible little beast.'

With great precision, the fork trapped the alien's head and THUNK! it was embedded into a nearby tree. The alien was pinned between fork and wood. Standing there, like a shadow against the moonlight, was the boy with the lantern. His terrier, limping but otherwise all right, was jumping around at his heels.

'Mind y'self,' shouted the boy as he swung the lantern high over his head. It smashed against the tree, spilling its fiery contents over the alien. 'KREEEE!' The unearthly

sound of pure evil echoed around the garden as the creature writhed under the intense heat of the burning paraffin. The flames licked high up to the branches, the dry leaves going up like tinder. Soon the whole tree was alight, a massive pillar of fire. 'KREEEE!' cried the alien, for the last time. The fire flared up momentarily, changing colour from a deep orange to a blinding blue. The alien was gone.

Seeing the fire, Ralph raced over to Rachel. They clung to one another. She was unharmed. They both sat and stared in amazement at the ragged boy.

'Wotcha, I'm Tatty the Ratcatcher and you owe me two shillings.'

'But . . .' blurted Rachel. 'How did . . . that thing . . . its teeth . . . with the . . . ?'

'I don't know, girlie. All I know is, that thing over there came from yonder stars. It was a very evil, angry spirit. Oh yes, they have ghosts up there, you know, plenty of ghosts. From the moment it woke me from my grave, I knew there was work to be done. So I came. Like I said, that'll be two shillings, if you please.'

'But we haven't any money', piped up Rachel, who had gathered herself from her near-death experience.

'That's fine,' said the ratcatcher, 'I'm sure we can come to some arrangement.'

3

The sun shone high above the poplar trees at the end of Ralph's garden. Swarms of blackflies hovered like smoke around the upper branches. Beyond the back wall, amongst the old fridges and binliners of the wasteground,

was a small patch of lush meadow, green, with the occasional flash of field-flower colour. The nettles and fern had been cut back, breathing new life into the rose bushes which bloomed like fireworks. In the middle of the patch, just to the west of where the old church used to be, stood the tombstone from under the tent, rescued from Ralph's garden. A fresh inscription had been carved into the stone.

1814–1824

Here lies Tatty the Ratcatcher,
who died in a barn fire.

May he rest in peace.

golden slumbers

jean richardson

Sleepovers were Martina's idea. She made the rules and the rest of the gang did as they were told.

By the time it was Eleanor's turn, it was harder to make what her mother called 'a slumber party' exciting, but there was no getting out of it.

'I thought Sally was sick, and Alison had a nightmare and woke you all up,' said her mother, when Eleanor reminded her that it was her turn. 'Isn't it silly to go on having parties that don't agree with you? Can't you think up a nicer idea like . . .'

'It's my turn,' Eleanor repeated, 'and Martina –'

'Martina has far too much say in what you do. She's a bossy girl and you all give in to her. Why can't someone else call the tune for a change?'

'Because ...' But it was no use. Her mother would never understand how boring school would be without Martina. She was more . . . more everything than anyone else. To fall out with her would mean being one of the *drearies*, like Susan and Sonia and Stephanie, who were plain and mousey, and good at geography.

'But it is *your* party.'

'Yes, and I want a sleepover,' Eleanor said firmly.

'And where,' said her mother, 'is everyone going to sleep? There isn't room for five sleeping bags in your room – unless someone wants to sleep under the bed.'

It was a problem. Eleanor was also worried about what Martina would think of her home. All the others lived in modern houses, with gardens where you could have a barbecue. Living in the top half of an old house full of old things collected by her parents or handed down in the

family might be smart for grownups, but what would Martina think of it? Everything in her home was made of glossy new wood or some kind of plastic.

'What about the playroom?' she suggested. 'I could tidy it up.'

The playroom was an attic with a small dormer window and a ceiling that sloped so steeply that in places Eleanor couldn't stand upright. When she was small and fitted in, she'd thought this was proof that the room had been meant for her.

'Well, if you're sure, I'll give it a good clean. I thought you didn't like it any more. You never seem to go up there.'

'I'm too tall now, that's why. I keep forgetting to bend down and bumping my head. But we'll be sitting or lying down. It's got quite a creepy feel. Just right for ghost stories.'

'Cobwebs,' said her mother briskly. 'I'll soon get rid of those. Now what do you want to eat? I take it you intend frightening yourselves to death on full stomachs ...'

Frightening themselves was exactly what Martina had in mind. 'We have supper, watch a really scary video, and then get into our sleeping bags. We switch the light off, and everyone has to tell a ghost story.'

'Where do we get the stories from?' Sally wasn't good at English.

'You find them in a book, or on TV. I shall make mine up,' said Martina, 'but you don't have to. And you can read it by torchlight if your tiny mind can't learn it by heart.'

'Could it be a poem?' Katy liked to be different.

'Yes. If it's really scary.'

The results were mixed. Two stories read by torchlight, one not finished because it was too boring, a bloodcurdling poem about a highwayman, a story Eleanor had been told by her father, and a virtuoso performance by Martina, who apparently watched endless films about vampires on her bedside TV. Sally had been sick – probably because she'd eaten too much – and Alison had woken up screaming about corpses with no faces.

The parties so far had been voted a success.

The day Eleanor chose for her party was the longest day of the year.

'You ought to be having a picnic in the park,' her mother said, 'not sitting in a darkened room watching some ghastly video.'

'It'll probably rain, and who wants to sit on damp grass,' said Eleanor, echoing one of her mother's favourite warnings. 'If we had a garden, we could camp out and have a barbecue. That's what Sally did for her party.'

'Well I'm sorry we haven't got a garden, but your father hates gardening – and we do have a boat.'

The boat took up most summer weekends and Eleanor wished she enjoyed it more. It was bad luck having a father who loved sailing, when she hated the water and was afraid of drowning.

She'd not been up to the playroom for nearly a year, and had forgotten the faded wallpaper. It was like a dress that had been washed so often that only a few sprigs of the flowery pattern remained. Her mother had told her that girls of her age, employed as maids, once lived at the top of the house, and she imagined them wearing dresses like the wallpaper.

The playroom had been vacuumed, but her mother had

left her toys alone. 'You'll only get cross if I throw anything away, so sort them out yourself.'

Eleanor smiled as she looked through her things. What a baby she'd once been. She'd keep the paints, but not the colouring books, and the paperbacks could go to the next Jumble. She gathered up the spilt *Scrabble* and the pack of *Happy Families*. So that's where it had got to. She didn't want to part with her dolls, or her dolls' house, although she was far too old to play with them. She shook the tiny squares of carpet and dusted the chestnut chairs, which had long since lost their gloss. The dolls needed a good shake too. Eleanor felt guilty. She'd once been so bound up in their lives, dressing and dosing them and even washing their hair.

She didn't want Martina to see them, but she didn't want to part with them either – not yet. There wasn't room in her bedroom, but then she remembered the cupboard that ran the length of one wall. There was room inside for several people, let alone a few dolls.

She pulled the door open, and suddenly remembered hiding in the cupboard years ago. At first it had seemed fun crouching there, with just a blade of light slicing the darkness. She was sure no one would find her – and they hadn't – but when she'd tried to get out, the door had stuck fast. She remembered banging, and then crying and screaming as the musty darkness pressed against her face. Worst of all had been the feeling that she wasn't alone, that someone else was locked in with her, while outside a voice began to sing ...

But today sunlight flooded into the space, and when she'd finished packing away the dolls and the dolls' house, the room looked quite inviting. And then she shivered. But not from cold, for bars of sunshine had

striped the faded carpet all morning, and it was still warm to her touch. It was odd. There was something chilling about the room, even on the hottest day.

The others seemed to feel it too.

'What a creepy room,' said Alison. 'I wouldn't like to sleep up here by myself.'

'Have you ever?' Martina was trying to see out of the dormer window.

'No,' said Eleanor. 'It was my playroom, but I never came up here after dark. It used to scare me after I hid in that cupboard during a game of hide and seek, and then couldn't get out.'

'You mean the door got stuck.'

Eleanor was stung by Martina's tone. 'I suppose so, but it felt as though some force wouldn't let me go. I thought there was someone in there, and a voice was singing outside.'

Martina turned back to the window, and Eleanor felt worried. The success of the party depended on Martina.

'I think it's really spooky,' said Sally, as they laid out their sleeping bags. 'I suppose it's because it's an old house. You feel it must have a past –'

'Rubbish,' interrupted Martina. 'I don't believe in ghosts, anyway.'

'*You* don't believe in ghosts!' Katy's granny glasses steamed up with indignation. 'But this was all your idea.'

'I like being frightened,' said Martina. 'I like scary stories because you wonder what will happen next, but I don't believe in ghosts. They're just like Father Christmas.'

'You enjoy frightening others,' said Alison, with a flash of insight.

At that moment, Eleanor's mother called out that supper was ready, so Martina didn't reply.

Eleanor had insisted that they didn't have sandwiches. 'They're dead boring!' Instead, there were chicken bites, sausage rolls, wedges of pizza, fish fingers on sticks so that they could dunk them in ketchup or relish, and bowls of peanuts and crisps. The food was laid out on the table, so that they could graze while watching the video.

'Do you believe in ghosts?' Katy asked Eleanor's mum when she brought in some hot sausages. She parked the hot dish before answering.

'I've never seen a ghost, if that's what you mean, and I don't think I believe in headless ladies walking the battlements with their heads under their arms, but ...' She paused. 'I do think, yes, that the past has some kind of continuing life. A murder or a sudden death might leave a kind of stain on the future. Some things are too terrible to vanish without a trace.'

No one said anything. Alison was secretly glad that the film was not a particularly scary one. 'You can frighten the daylights out of yourselves upstairs, but I'm not having a video nasty in the house,' Eleanor's mum had said, so Eleanor had settled for a new film they all wanted to see.

She knew Martina was disappointed. She wasn't surprised when halfway through Martina said she had a headache and thought she might be sick. Eleanor suspected she was annoyed that the others were enjoying the film. Somewhat ungraciously, because the film had just got to a good part, she showed Martina where the loo was.

When Mum suggested that Martina might like to lie down on Eleanor's bed, Eleanor was happy to let her take

over. Mums were best at dealing with people who felt sick – if Martina really did.

Martina was quite glad to lie down. She thought she might be getting a migraine, and a little sympathy from Eleanor's mother was better than a stupid film. She liked to be in charge, but this time she didn't seem to be.

They were so boring. Alison and Sally were scared of their own shadows, Katy was always trying to be clever, and Eleanor lived in a house where everything was old and peculiar. She'd like to give them a real fright – something that would make up for that tame video.

And then she remembered the cupboard. They'd be going up to the playroom soon, and they probably wouldn't bother to tell scary stories if she wasn't there to take the lead. Supposing she were to creep upstairs now and hide in the cupboard. Then when they'd snuggled down in their sleeping bags, she could make a frightening noise inside the cupboard, maybe a groan or a bloodcurdling shriek ... It would serve them right.

She slid out from under the duvet and shaped the pillow to look like a body. Eleanor's mum might look in to see how she was, but she'd go away if she thought Martina was fast asleep.

She opened the bedroom door and crept towards the attic stairs. The film was still going on, and she guessed that Eleanor's parents were having supper. She had taken off her shoes, and the rough wood of the uncarpeted stairs pricked through her socks. What a dump! She pushed open the attic door. It was still light outside, but the room was already shadowy and spooky.

There was no need to get into the cupboard at once, but Martina looked inside to make sure there was room. One

end was full of old toys – didn't Eleanor ever throw anything away? – but there was plenty of space at the other end.

Perhaps she should see what it felt like, while she had time to change her mind. Martina stepped into the cupboard, crouched down, and pulled the door to. It shut with a firm click, leaving only a splinter of light in the cupboard.

For the first time in her life Martina felt afraid. She was trapped. She was about to hammer on the door when she heard someone giggle. It was all right, the others had come upstairs, they were only a few feet away ... She was listening for a familiar voice when suddenly she began to feel drowsy. She shut her eyes and was slipping away into sleep when it struck her that the voices she could hear were *inside* not outside the cupboard . . .

Before they went up to the playroom, Eleanor put her head round the door of her bedroom and saw that Martina was asleep.

'I shouldn't wake her, darling,' said her mother. 'I'll look in later and she can come and join you if she wants to. I phoned her mother, and she said Martina often gets bad headaches. Now are you all off to bed, or is it story-telling first?'

Eleanor suspected that her mother was teasing her.

'We get undressed and into our sleeping bags and then we have the stories,' she said. 'We don't need anything else, thanks.'

Half an hour later, they were ready to begin. They had put their sleeping bags close together in the middle of the room, and no one thought Alison was being silly when she suggested not turning out the light.

'We're supposed to be in the dark,' Katy pointed out. 'Martina insists.'

'Martina isn't here,' Alison said, 'so we can do as we like.'

'I'll put it out before I go to sleep,' Eleanor volunteered.

The cone of light seemed to breed shadows in the corners of the room.

'Who wants to start?' Eleanor felt it was her duty to keep the party going.

'Do we have to?' Sally asked.

'Yes.' Katy was firm. 'Otherwise Martina'll find out and say we're hopeless without her. I'll start if you like.'

So Katy began telling them the plot of a film about a haunted house. It was a gruesome story, but it seemed less frightening than the playroom, and they drew closer together.

As it was her party, Eleanor felt she ought to tell a really good story, but although she'd looked through several books of scary stories, none of them seemed very frightening. So she was surprised to hear herself say, 'And now I shall tell you my story' – and in a voice that didn't sound at all like hers.

'This was my bedroom, see. I'd never 'ad a room all to meself before, and Madam told me 'ow lucky I was. Not just to 'ave a room of me own, but to be living in such a nice 'ouse. Madam said lots of girls who go into service 'ave to kip down in the kitchen and live on scraps, but I 'ad the run of the 'ouse and same food as the family – well, what was left over.

' "And the work isn't hard", says Madam. "Just doing the fires, dusting and dishes, taking the dog out, and looking after Miss May and Miss Daisy."

'They was the children. Ever so well-behaved in front of the master and mistress, but fiends when they was left with me. I

couldn't do nothing with 'em. They was meant to be in bed, but they was all over the 'ouse, getting into terrible mischief.'

Eleanor couldn't understand why she was talking like this. It wasn't a proper story, yet she sensed that the others were willing her to continue.

'They was always hiding my things. Once Miss Daisy took the necklace Mam gave me. I was so cross I slapped her, and she went crying to Madam, who said, "Give it back to her, darling. It's only a cheap little thing. I'm afraid those sort of people are rather selfish." Selfish! I bet Madam wouldn't have lent me any of 'er necklaces.

'But I didn't wish 'em harm. Not real harm. Truly I didn't. I told the policeman I knew nothing about it, though Madam was screaming that it was all my fault. I reckon it must 'ave been Miss Daisy's idea. She was the worst of the two. She wasn't as pretty as Miss May, and I think it made 'er all 'orrible and jealous inside. I reckon she suggested 'iding in me cupboard. I s'ppose they meant to jump out and frighten me.

'Mind you, I never liked that cupboard. Me few things rattled round like peas in a drum, and I always thought it smelled musty. I wouldn't 'ave shut 'em in there, like Madam said I did, no matter 'ow much I wanted to punish 'em.

'I never 'eard no banging and shouting, I told the policeman. But then I wouldn't 'ave. I was down the bottom, washing up the dishes. Fair mountain of pots and pans there was. I thought they was in bed, and when I come up 'ere, it was quiet as the grave. I couldn't 'ave got on with me sewing if I'd knowed they were there, just a few feet away. Must have suffocated, the policeman said. The door fits very tight and no air gets in . . .'

The room was ice-cold, but Eleanor's forehead was damp with sweat. She felt as though telling the story had drained all her strength. Was there more? She hoped not.

And then, as they lay in petrified silence, there came the sound of singing.

The voice was soft and tremulous, the song one they all knew, a lullaby they'd learned at primary school.

Golden slumbers kiss your eyes,
Smiles awake you when you rise . . .

Eleanor looked round at the others. None of them were singing.

'It's coming from over there,' whispered Katy, pointing to the cupboard. They all looked towards the cupboard.

Sleep, pretty wantons, do not cry,
And I will sing a lullaby.

It was the hardest thing Eleanor had ever done. But it was her party and her cupboard. As she forced herself to cross the room, it came back to her that it was the same song she'd heard years ago.

No one else moved.

Care you know not, therefore sleep –

The song ceased abruptly as Eleanor wrenched open the door and looked inside the cupboard.

There were her dolls just as she had left them, but there was now another, lifesize doll in the other corner.

Martina looked as though she'd fallen asleep. It was only when they found that they couldn't wake her, that Alison began to scream.

worms

john gatehouse

1

Jeremy loved worms.

He loved to hold their juicy, fat, slimy bodies in the palm of his hand.

Sometimes he would twine one around his index fingers and them slowly pull in opposite directions until its body ripped in two.

'Uggh! That's gross!' screamed his sister, Annabel, when Jeremy showed her his latest trick. 'You really are weird, Jeremy.'

Jeremy didn't care what his sister thought. Or anyone else for that matter.

In his bedroom, he kept a large glass tank which was filled with his collection of worms. He would watch for hours as they tunnelled through the earth of his worm-farm.

And, when they grew large enough, he would take them out of the tank and put them in his lunchbox and sneak them into school.

Jeremy's favourite trick was to wait until the class was quiet and everyone was working. Then he would take a worm out of his lunchbox and drop it down the neck of a girl in front of him. Their shrieks and screams made the boring school day more fun than a trip to the circus.

Of course, Jeremy's tricks made sure he was always in trouble with his teachers, but this didn't worry him.

Jeremy didn't like people. He liked worms.

But the worms didn't like Jeremy.

2

'I bet you wouldn't!' said Andrew, sneering.

'I bet I would!' said Jeremy.

He was standing in the school playing field, surrounded by a group of boys from his class. Between his fingers he held a big, fat worm.

'All right,' said Andrew, holding up a bag of sweets. 'I bet you all these gobstoppers that you won't eat that worm.'

Jeremy smiled. A hush had fallen over the group. Everyone was staring at him, daring him on.

He knew what they were thinking: *He won't do it!*

But Jeremy would.

And he did.

He put one end of the worm between his fat lips and sucked.

'Yuck! That's disgusting!' cried Kamal, as the other end of the worm disappeared into Jeremy's mouth.

The boys ran off, laughing, to tell their friends.

Andrew threw the bag of sweets to Jeremy, before running after them. 'You win, Jeremy. But Kamal's right. That is disgusting!'

Jeremy waited until the boys were out of sight.

Then he quickly spat out the worm he had been hiding under his tongue. He felt sick.

'Ucck! That'll teach them not to believe me!' he said, speaking to the worm that now lay wriggling about on the wet grass. 'But I'll never do that again. You taste revolting!'

And, just because he wanted to, he stamped his foot hard on the worm before running off to wash out his mouth.

On the ground, dozens of worms burrowed up to the surface of the field.

They all lifted their heads in the direction Jeremy had taken.

3

If there was one teacher Jeremy hated it was Mrs Corbalt, who taught history. So that afternoon, when she had left the class to fetch some books, Jeremy took his chance.

He pulled the lunchbox from his holdall, and quickly walked up to the front of the class.

The other children knew that Jeremy was up to something.

'What are you doing, Jeremy?' whispered Leanne nervously.

Jeremy growled. 'Bug off!'

He pulled up the lid of Mrs Corbalt's desk and emptied out the contents of the lunch box.

The classroom door opened.

'Jeremy, what are you doing?' demanded Mrs Corbalt, entering the room.

Jeremy smiled sweetly. 'Just wanted a new pencil, miss,' he lied, shutting the desk lid.

'Then ask me first!' Mrs Corbalt snapped, pushing Jeremy aside.

She opened her desk and let out a terrifying scream.

Wriggling all over her files and chalk were dozens of dirty, slimy worms.

Of course, Jeremy was sent to the headmaster.

'I'm sending a note home to your parents,' Mr Hunter

told him. 'And you will not be going to the ice rink with the rest of your class on Friday.'

Jeremy didn't care. He didn't like ice skating. He always fell over and the other kids laughed at him and called him a beached whale.

When school ended, Jeremy walked home across the playing fields by himself. He was glad he had scared Mrs Corbalt. It had brightened up the day.

One by one, the worms crawled through the grass, following him.

4

That night, Jeremy dreamt that he had turned into a worm.

Not a small, common-or-garden worm, but a great big fat slug of a worm, the size of Jeremy himself.

This didn't surprise him. He had read a lot of books about worms and knew that some worms in Australia could reach the size of three metres. Compared to them, he was tiny.

He couldn't tell which end was his head and which end was his feet, not that he had feet any more because he was a worm.

Jeremy wasn't sure he liked being a worm.

For a start, he felt hungry, but worms, as far as he knew, didn't eat the food Jeremy liked to eat. No more burgers-and-chips for Jeremy the Worm.

Instead, he found himself burrowing down into the earth, feeding on the soil.

I'm eating mud! cried Jeremy to himself, not liking it one bit.

Suddenly, the ground shook, and he felt himself being lifted up into the sunlight.

He crashed onto the grass, wriggling madly about, trying to escape.

Looking up, he could see a giant-sized human child standing over him, holding a spade.

The child smiled. The sort of smile Jeremy smiled before he pulled a worm in two.

The child lifted up the spade and brought the blade crashing down towards Jeremy the Worm's big, fat body.

Jeremy woke up with a scream.

It was only a nightmare! he told himself, before pulling back his covers to cool down.

He looked down at his sheets.

They were covered in mud.

5

Jeremy was in a bad mood the following morning.

He was always in a bad mood, but not as bad as today. After his dream, he had been too scared to go back to sleep.

It was the mud on his sheets that had upset him. *Where had it come from?*

'I must have got mud on my feet when I was walking across the playing fields yesterday,' he told himself. But he couldn't remember seeing mud on his shoes.

He stared at the worms in his worm-farm. They were pressed against the glass, almost as if they were looking at him.

'Leave me alone!' he screamed, and ran out of the room.

When Jeremy was in a bad mood, he liked to take it out on anyone within reach. So he poured a glass of fruit juice over the picture Annabel was drawing on the breakfast table.

'Serves you right!' he said, when she started crying. 'You shouldn't have got in my way.'

He decided to leave his worms at home today. He didn't fancy the thought of carrying them around with him.

At school, Jeremy sat quietly in class. He didn't feel like bullying anyone.

'Jeremy! Stop daydreaming!' said his teacher sternly. 'Get your books out and get on with your work.'

Muttering rude words to himself, Jeremy reached into his holdall and grabbed hold of something squishy in his hand. Quickly pulling it back out, as if he had been burnt, he found himself holding a handful of big, fat worms ...

6

Jeremy's screams made all the children jump in fright.

'Jeremy! What's the matter?' demanded Mr Harcourt.

Jeremy couldn't speak. He kept looking at the worms he had dropped on the floor. They were wriggling all over his shoes.

The other children started giggling.

Mr Harcourt scooped up the worms in his hand and threw them out of the window.

'What were you going to do with those worms, Jeremy?' he demanded. 'Put them in my desk to frighten me?' Mr Harcourt had heard all about Jeremy's tricks.

'No, sir,' whispered Jeremy.

'I don't believe you,' said his teacher angrily. 'And if I

catch you with any more worms in this school, I'll put you on suspension. Now sit down!'

Jeremy sat, and he brooded. He knew how those worms had got into his bag. It was rotten Annabel. She must have put them there to pay him back for ruining her soppy picture.

Well, he'd get his revenge.

Jeremy was glad when the dinner bell sounded. He was still in a foul mood, so he pushed himself to the head of the queue. Anyone who complained was given a punch on the arm.

'Potatoes, bacon and spaghetti,' said Mrs Martin, the school dinner lady, as she passed Jeremy a plate of food.

Pushing past the other children, Jeremy sat down at the table. He was starving!

He lifted off the lid and looked down at his plate.

Next to the bacon slices and potatoes were dozens of small, thin, wiggling worms.

7

Jeremy jumped up, knocking over the dinner table. It crashed to the ground. Everyone in the dining hall turned their heads to look at him.

Mr Harcourt was in the hall, making sure the children didn't become too boisterous. He hurried over to Jeremy who stood staring at the floor, shaking.

When the teacher saw the worms on the floor next to Jeremy's dinner, he grabbed hold of the boy and frog-marched him out of the hall.

'Hey, leggo!' cried Jeremy, after he had been pushed

along to the headmaster's office. 'I haven't done anything. It was the worms!'

'Don't be stupid,' shouted Mr Harcourt. 'How could those worms have got onto your plate unless you put them there? It was just another silly trick to scare the other children!'

Mr Harcourt told the headmaster all that had happened. Jeremy didn't stand a chance.

'I'm suspending you for a week,' said Mr Hunter, who was just as angry as Mr Harcourt. 'Collect your belongings and go straight home. And I'll be phoning your mother to let her know why you're not in school.'

Jeremy walked home, furious. If his sister had put those worms in his bag, then who put some on his dinner plate? It was hardly likely to have been Mrs Martin.

Turning into the park, Jeremy looked closely around at the flower beds. He pushed his hand in the earth, and pulled out worm after worm.

Throwing the worms on the ground, he stamped his foot down hard upon them.

'I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU!' he screamed.

8

Jeremy's mother was waiting for him when he got home.

'Your headmaster has just phoned me,' she said, looking as angry as Jeremy had ever seen her. 'I don't know why you played those stupid tricks, but you won't get away with it!'

Jeremy pretended to listen while his mother scolded him, ordering him to get rid of the worms, but his mind

was on other things. Like how to pay his sister back for getting him into trouble.

And what he was going to do with his worms.

When Annabel arrived home, she seemed to know that she was in Jeremy's bad books. Instead of going out to play in the garden, the way she usually did, she kept close to her mother so that Jeremy couldn't thump her.

Frustrated, Jeremy stormed upstairs and slammed the door. He stared darkly at the worms in the worm-farm. They seemed to be laughing at him.

Jeremy snatched up the glass tank and carried it to his opened window.

'Get lost!' he screamed, and emptied the earth and worms onto the grass below.

He sat on his bed, gasping for breath. Now that the worms were gone, he felt a lot happier.

And since his rotten mother had grounded him for a whole fortnight, he decided to have an early night.

Outside, as the evening grew darker, hundreds of worms crawled through the wet grass towards his bedroom window.

9

Jeremy was asleep.

He knew that because he was having another dream about the worms.

This time, he lay in his bed, unable to move, as hundreds of worms crawled all over his body.

They moved across his legs and arms, slipping and sliding, and across his face and through his hair. Jeremy

wanted to scream, but he was too scared to open his mouth in case a big fat worm crawled inside.

The worms wriggled across his stomach, and over his shoulders, wet and slimy, their bodies moving back and forth like a caterpillar's.

Wake up! Jeremy told himself. *It's not real*!!

He struggled to open his eyes. They felt heavy with sleep. When he did open them, he let out a gasp of relief.

There were no worms on him. He couldn't see a rotten worm anywhere in the room. It had only been a dream, and a horrible one, at that. But Jeremy didn't have to be afraid. He had got rid of his worms. They couldn't hurt him any more.

Under the covers, something moved across Jeremy's feet.

Startled, he wrenched the covers onto the floor and looked down at the end of the bed.

The white sheet was lost beneath a pool of dirt-stained, wriggling brown bodies.

The worms had come home to Jeremy.

10

The worms slithered across Jeremy's legs. They raised their heads as one, looking up at him.

Jeremy screamed and rolled out of bed. His head struck the bedside table as he landed with a thump onto the floor.

Leaping to his feet, and ignoring the pain in his head, he screamed again and again, slapping his legs with his hands in case there were any worms left on him.

His mother, father and sister burst into the room, looking worried.

'Jeremy? What's the matter?' demanded his father.

Then he saw the worms crawling all over the bed.

'Jeremy, I've told you before to get rid of those horrible creatures!' shouted his mother. 'Look at the mess you've made! And why aren't they in their tank?'

Jeremy tried to explain, but no one believed him. His mother told him that he would be going to the doctor, the very next day. He needed something for his nerves, she said.

Jeremy watched numbly while his father collected up all the worms in a shoebox and took them outside. He was shaking. He started to cry.

I never want to see another worm in my life, he thought.

In the garden, under the light of a full moon, the worms tunnelled their way deep down back into the earth.

There they would stay, waiting.

Waiting for another boy like Jeremy.

The author would like to point out that no worm was injured during the writing of this book.

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